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Great Southern 4 Hour heralds challenging global production racing Toyota 86 debut

After several years of planning and many months of preparation the Pedders Racing Toyota 86 made its long awaited, world first appearance for a national production car championship entry, as the #86 took on Round 1 of the 2013 Australian Manufacturers Championship (AMChamp) at the renowned Phillip Island Grand Prix Circuit.

As the Bendigo team arrived to a cold and damp Phillip Island circuit, the Pitman Trucks transporter was unpacked, and the garage set up, ready for a busy weekend of racing. Since the Bathurst shakedown, modifications had been made to the transporter, making loading and unloading a much more efficient task, and ensuring the Pedders entry travelled safe as the journey around Australia commenced its opening leg. Committed to efficiency and professionalism, the pit garage set up was completed by only two team members, the new modular workbenches in place, and a clinical transition of tools and equipment had the team ready for Friday practice, except for one important item, the car.

Team Principle and driver, Grant Phillips of Pedders Bendigo, along with the rest of the crew had made a stop at Grafico Auto Disegno to collect the 86 in its revamped and eye-catching livery, completed just in time for its AMChamp debut. The culmination of months of effort from the committed team members and sponsors alike, finally came to life in a truly stunning livery, and a race package that was ready to take on the Island.

Friday's free practice session would be delayed as low lying fog settled in, but as visibility improved, Andrew Turpie climbed on board and headed out to the fast flowing track to take his first laps in the #86, after stepping aside at the car's first on track outing as Australian film and television star, Shane Jacobson took to the seat. Pre-season testing at Winton had the car in an 'on the money' starting setup, and with new tyres, Turpie began to lower the times. With no data available on the new Hankook control tyre, the Pedders Racing team focused on handling, lap speed, fuel consumption and tyre wear. As the sessions fell away, the crew cycled through the tyre sets, the car looking the goods on track with its custom OZ Racing rims by AMG Australia, while Turpie shaved seconds off the lap time, closing the gap between the Toyota and the Hondas of Class D, as he explained,

"The handling improved each time we hit the track, and incremental set up changes on the Pedders remote canister coil-overs are bringing us closer to where we need to be. The brakes are excellent thanks to our DBA 5000 series rotors and Project Mu club racer pads with no sign of fade, despite the heavy demands in several locations around here. The car feels really good, with our only issue being an undefined engine gremlin, with the mid rev range causing some concerns with mid corner speeds, as well as a reduction in power, but we hope this will be rectified before we race."

With Round 1 of the AMChamps officially starting Saturday, the morning had Phillips back in the Toyota and out on track for his first time in the official competition life of the car, but there would be little time to learn ahead of the qualifying sessions. Pleased with the short session, Phillips still felt more time was needed to find the improvements the team was chasing. Post session, a thorough debrief and laptop check of the engine settings thanks to MRT Performance and ECUTEK was completed, the car then seeing final preparations for qualifying.

Turpie took the wheel for the first sessions posting quick times, in fact some were two seconds faster than early Friday practice. With just minutes to go, the team called Turpie in for a minor tweak to the Pedders suspension before a final two laps. The first sector was clearly faster, the changes bringing the hoped results, however, the session nearly ended in disaster at the exit of turn five after Turpie found himself wide and on the wet grass, spinning trackside, but pulling it together and returning without damage to the pit lane.

As the afternoon unfolded, Phillips headed out for the second qualifier, posting several good laps, the Toyota 86 continuing to perform well under pressure. With times confirmed, the #86 had qualified a respectable third in class, notably ahead of several higher classified entries. Post qualifying, the team completed maintenance on the #86, a change in Valvoline oils, new front Project Mu brake pads, checking all Bosch Automotive and Whiteline products were all in good condition, a full clean of the Grafico styled bodywork, the team clearly determined to be ready to take on the Great Southern 4 Hour endurance challenge as Phillips wrapped up,

"The overall package on the 86 is excellent; it's just a matter of us as drivers getting our head around the very different handling characteristics of the new car. We have spent the last few years racing a front wheel drive and now are changing our driving style to suit the rear wheel drive setup, as well as still working to find the source of the engine issue"

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that we've been chasing all weekend. With all of that said, a lot can happen in four hours so we now need to turn our focus to race strategy and consistency."

As morning dawned on race day, a wet and dark day hovered over the Phillip Island circuit, the less than ideal yet somewhat come to be expected island weather, causing Phillips some concerns in morning warm up. Discussion in the Pedders Racing garage was all about strategy and how the set up would be modified to suit the ever changing conditions. After consultation with the weather radar and some island locals, the team planned for a drying track, keeping the set up as it was, the decision meaning they would have to push on through the initial challenging conditions.

Frustratingly, the damp conditions soon deteriorated into wet conditions as race start loomed, no stress for Turpie who would make the race start in a cloud of spray through the opening turns, the strong field making a clean getaway. Driving to the conditions, the Toyota kept clear of the early incidents as Turpie found his rhythm and settled in to bring down the lap times as the dry line formed in the easing rain.

Strategy would now come into play as the first hour ticked past, the Pedders Racing team calling the #86 entry to pit lane for a refuel, returning to continue the challenge for Class D position. As a competitor served a drive through penalty, things were looking up for the team, the Toyota looking strong with lap times consistent as Turpie hunted down his challengers.

In motor sport, it can all change in a heartbeat, and as the clock ticked over to 1 hour 50 minutes, things went from promise to stress when Turpie lost all power on the exit from turn 12 onto the main straight, coming to rest safely behind flag point two where it remained for 20 vital minutes until a safety car was called and the 86 back was towed to the pits. Pushing to not lost any further time and still gain a result, the Pedders Racing team completed a refuel and driver change, however, the engine problem was still being diagnosed as Phillips sat behind the wheel.

With support of MRT Performance's Brett Middleton, who was actively competing in the Australian Rally Championship that weekend and speaking from his own pit area, the team sourced the issue and began to complete testing checks as the clock continued to tick. A fresh mind, the team's youngest mechanic, Chris Quinn, soon traced the problem to the exhaust. A failure in the catalytic converter in the first stage of the factory exhaust sent an implosion of material downstream, completely blocking the custom Nameless exhaust system components. After removing the entire system, cleaning and bolting it back onto the 86, the team were cleared by scrutineers to return to the race, the news bringing relief and delight to the crew, fans and supportive fellow competitors. In the moments following, a heartbreaking realisation, the time lost waiting for the return under safety car and completing the repair would put an end to the team's endurance hopes, meaning even though the #86 crew worked tirelessly to overcome disaster and take the chequered flag to finish third in Class D, their AMChamp debut would officially wrap up with a DNF due to not meeting the minimum race distance.

Regardless of which way the results fell, the Pedders Racing team would take away great pride and greater learnings. With preparations second to none, their efforts noted by legends of racing including Glenn Seton and John Bowe, their dedication in getting back on track for the race finish seeing the #86 applauded across the line by a proud team, impressed officials and many fellow competitors, it would be a tough weekend, but well worth every moment as the team looked at the positives and began to think about Round 2, their next chance for glory.

"We made it through a very tough weekend that had challenges everywhere we turned. Between the weather, the exhaust issues, a general lack of available data with a new car, and not having driven the 86 at this track, it made for a difficult weekend but we learnt a lot, and can leave proud of the efforts of our team and the respect we have earned by not giving up or giving in". Andrew Turpie

"The reaction to the car from race fans and our fellow competitors during the weekend was very positive. The number of people looking at it and commenting on the way this car presents was a great pat on the back. Yes, we are disappointed with our end classification, but we can only be happy with the way the team worked on, and we have every reason to be confident that we will be on the podium soon". Grant Phillips

Pedders Racing are proudly supported by Pedders Suspension, Bosch Australia, Pitman Trucks, AMG Australia, Oz Racing, MRT Performance, ECUTEK, PBR, Whiteline, Project Mu, Grafico Auto Disegno, Heidi Yi Mineral Cosmetics, Valvoline, Exedy, Reliable Rack & Pinions, Nameless, Cobalt Retail, Freak Fabrications, Pedders Bendigo, J&A Light Freight and CIMA Media.

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